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Baseball's All-Star Game: Some History

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Baseball's All-Star Game is coming up Tuesday at Safeco Field in Seattle, one of the newest, and by most accounts one of the most beautiful of the new stadiums: "The House that Junior and A-Rod Built" before they left town.

Although the concept of an All-Star game dates back to 1858 and a game between all-star teams from Brooklyn and New York, it was sixty-eight years ago that the first modern all-star game was held, July 6, 1933.

Over nearly seven decades this game has become a marvelous showcase for the best baseball talent, the marking point for mid-season, and a great promotional event for baseball.

The game itself was the creation of Arch Ward sports editor of the Chicago Tribune who was able to persuade the owners to hold a game between the American and National League All-Stars in Chicago in conjunction with the Century of Progress Exhibition of 1933. Those who welcomed this game saw it as the dawning of a new age in which the use of modern promotional techniques had achieved acceptance in baseball.

A number of owners objected to the event as a distraction from the regular season, an unnecessary interruption of the normal patterns. No doubt some also objected because they were not going to make enough money from the game as the proceeds were going to charity. Managers objected to the game because it broke-up the regular season, although more objection came from those managers whose teams were doing well than those whose teams were struggling.

After the first all-star game the managers were designated as the previous year's pennant winners, but for that first game two of the grand old managers, Connie Mack and John McGraw were given the honor. For the first two years players were chosen by both managers and fans, and then from 1935-46 the managers selected the all-stars. Beginning in 1947 the selection of the starting lineup passed to the fans and remained with them until 1957 when Cincinnati fans stuffed the ballot box and chose Reds for seven of the eight starting positions.

This led to the removal of the fans from the process from 1958 to 1969. During that period major league managers, coaches, and players, made the selections. In 1970 the selection of the

starting lineups returned to the fans. Ballot box stuffing and sentimentalism rather than performance continue as problems with this system that now includes on-line voting, but the promotional value of this system is seen as overriding the problems.

The first contest was dubbed the "Game of the Century," as 49,200 fans packed Comiskey Park and millions listened on radio. Never had there been so much baseball talent gathered in one place. The game featured such stars as Carl Hubbell, Lefty Grove, Earl Averill, Joe Cronin, Frankie Frisch, and Lefty Gomez.

But the star of the first game was Babe Ruth, at age 38, less than two years from retirement still the dominant force in baseball. Over the years the Babe had developed the uncanny ability to hit home runs for special occasions. Appropriately then, Ruth hit the first home run in All-Star Game history, a two run shot in the third inning giving the American League its third run in a 4-2 victory. In the 8th inning Ruth put frosting on the cake making a remarkable running catch in right field off the bat of Chick Hafey to help preserve the victory.

The following year the game moved to the Polo Grounds in New York, where Giant left-handed screwball artist Carl Hubbell was the starting pitcher. In the first and second innings, Hubbell struck out in order, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jimmy Foxx, Al Simmons, and Joe Cronin. All five of these American League All-Stars were subsequently elected to the Hall of Fame. With moments like these it only took two years before the All-Star game was cemented into the pattern of the baseball season. And many more great moments have followed.

This year the All-Star game comes in the middle of a most interesting season in which the host Seattle Mariners are running away with their division. The M's are sporting the best record in baseball despite having lost the likes of Junior, A-Rod and The Big Unit over the past few years. Now they have Ichiro, the Japanese League sensation who is leading the league in hitting and may set off a tsunami of signings of Japanese players to major league contracts.

Equally startling are the great starts by the Cubs, Phillies and the Twins who lead their divisions. For Cub fans however skepticism must reign as they await July, August and September, legendary months in Cub Martyrology. As for the Twins, they look like they will be in it for the long haul with good pitching and

defense. The Phillies too are a major surprise and time will tell if they are imposters or just playing above their heads with manager Larry Bowa impersonating the late Billy Martin.

The performance by the Twins and Mariners raises questions about some of the small-market, big-market analysis of the past few years. Still a number of franchises continue to struggle and one may not survive the season. Montreal is waiting for someone to pull the plug as they are attracting crowds that could not support most minor league franchises. Baseball in Florida remains in serious difficulty although winning and a new stadium may yet save the Marlins in Miami. As for the Devil Rays they seem destined to leave The Can (Tropicana Field) before many more home-stands are lost.

Whatever the future holds the All-Star Game remains the All-Star Game, a great showcase for the stars of the national pastime and, the latest conventional wisdom of the national media notwithstanding, a great attraction for both fans and players.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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